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THE TEACHING OF FRENCH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

THE discussion of modern-language teaching which for two decades has been carried on across the water with such intense-ness has failed to arouse a corresponding interest on this side of the Atlantic. The demand for greater attention to physical science has met with general approval and ready response; new courses have been introduced, old ones lengthened, laboratories built and filled with costly apparatus, additional teachers employed. What recognition, meanwhile, has been given the modern-language movement, of which J. J. Findlay¹ says:

Quite deliberately the present author ventures to assert that the "reform" in modern language teaching now in progress is one of the most noteworthy events in the sphere of teaching since the Renaissance, surpassing in importance even the results of introducing science to the schools.

What share have American authors in the 720 *theoretischen Erörterungen* catalogued by Breymann² for the eighteen years from 1881 to 1898 inclusive? Hardly more than the odd twenty. The reason for this comparative neglect of modern language instruction lies largely in our remoteness from non-English-speaking peoples. Hence ability to read the foreign language has been our almost exclusive aim, and ability to read has come to mean merely the ability to turn into more or less slovenly English an approximation to the thought of the original. So remote even is the required approximation that clever boys have been known to "cram" French enough in six weeks to pass the entrance examination for reputable colleges. Naturally, then, some have considered a single year long enough to allow for so easy a subject. Such conditions tend to perpetuate themselves, for teachers thus trained cannot in general impart what they do not possess, that is, an all-around command of a foreign language, and a broad view of what it should stand for in education.

¹*Principles of Class Teaching* (Macmillan & Co.).

²H. BREYMAN, *Die neusprachliche Reform-Literatur* (Leipzig: G. Böhme, 1895 and 1900).

The membership of the Modern Language Association of America is composed largely of college men, and it deals with problems of advanced scholarship rather than with the elementary work of secondary schools. In 1897-98, however, a committee of twelve, appointed by the association, made a careful study of the teaching of modern languages and submitted a report that has been widely circulated. A New England Modern Language Association has just been organized with the purpose of uniting modern language teachers throughout the section in an effort to bring school and college together, and to make the instruction in modern languages as effective as possible. In answer to a question concerning the work of this association, the head of a department in Harvard University recently wrote:

I should prefer to have questions about the teaching of modern languages in the schools considered on the basis (1) of the primary function which the schools have to fulfil, namely, to meet the needs of the great mass of pupils who do not go to college; and (2) of bringing the requirements of the colleges into harmony with this function.

Assuming that French is the first language, and that a competent teacher finds himself in charge of a class of thirty-five to forty beginners just entering the high school, how shall he teach them on such a basis?

For the first year, let his aim be the general development of his pupils along the lines of ultimate linguistic power. "Bedenkt, ihr habet weiches Holz zu spalten," must be his watchword. Both as a proper foundation for future work, and to meet a crying need of every pupil in the class, general educational aims, rather than extensive knowledge of French, should be his object. These aims are: (1) promptness and accuracy of ear and eye; (2) flexibility and control of the vocal organs; (3) feeling for the logical structure and necessary connectedness of the sentence; (4) fundamental habits of agreement and word-order; (5) familiarity with common grammatical terms. As incidental to these ends, and as a means of obtaining them, a small vocabulary of common words and expressions should be thoroughly mastered, and a hundred pages, more or less, of the easiest French read in class.

From the beginning the pupil must realize certain facts: (1) that French was first spoken and then written; (2) that real language is swift; (3) that an answer must be right the first time to count; (4) that nine-tenths right is all wrong; (5) that all the work is for one pupil, and each boy must feel himself to be the one.

A class of beginners reminds one somewhat of a litter of young puppies. They cannot hear—distinctions of open and closed, long and short, voiced and unvoiced, are lost upon them; they cannot see—two or three letters omitted, inserted, changed or transposed are quite immaterial; they cannot control their muscles—and the queerest sounds and grimaces result from the best intentions. Whether a different study of English in the lower grades would give us creatures that possess themselves to a greater extent is a question that we can only hint at here. The limitations are real, however, and as accurate imitation is essential in early language work, the pupil must learn first of all to hear, see, and reproduce. In this a vast amount of chorus work, repeating in unison after the teacher or a comrade, is of the greatest value in large classes. Such work may properly be considered as a gymnastic or a musical exercise, in which any marked individual deviation from the standard is readily noticed and located. Questions should be so brief and definite that a prompt, correct answer may fairly be expected from the pupil called, and instantly repeated by the class at the sign from the teacher.

The first work should be phonetic; the vowel sounds explained and produced. In this the "vowel triangle" will be useful. The formation of nasal vowels is explained, with the approximate correspondence of nasals to the non-nasal open vowels. Then come the sounds corresponding to certain consonant graphs. Drill on the sounds separately and in common words that are spoken, repeated, associated with thought, written by the teacher and copied by the pupils, then pronounced again. Ear, tongue, and eye must be trained together, and their impressions associated with thought as closely and permanently as possible. In securing this thought English may properly be used, as well as

in explanations. Sweet¹ puts the matter in a nutshell when he says:

As long as we are learning the foreign language, it is our first business to have it explained to us as clearly and unambiguously as possible. Therefore all explanations ought to be in the language we know—that is, our own—not in the one we do not know.

The Committee of Twelve is right, too, in saying:

Grammatical terms do not come under the head of “everyday forms of expression.” The principal value of grammatical drill conducted in German is to teach the learner how to handle the sentence. So far as the vocabulary is concerned, he might better be learning something else.

Add to this that the English grammatical terms have a far greater value for the English-speaking pupil, who comes to the high school with little if any knowledge of their meaning, and who must learn them in the foreign language class if he is ever to know them. “The first preparation for the study of a foreign language is the acquisition of a thorough knowledge of the peculiarities of one’s own language,” says Sweet. We may not entirely agree with this statement, but we must feel that the chief linguistic “need of the great mass of pupils” is English rather than French; and, with this in mind, I cannot say that my business is to teach French, and refuse to concern myself with English. A considerable amount of comparison and contrast aids in the intelligent comprehension of both languages.

For months the utmost care must be given to pronunciation; for if not learned well at first, it generally never will be. Every word and phrase should be drilled upon orally in class before being assigned for home study. The use of a phonetic text would perhaps make it possible to assign home work with less danger of acquiring wrong habits of pronunciation; but even in Germany most teachers probably do not advise a phonetic text, and with our time limitations it does not seem well to extend the use of phonetic characters beyond their application to words or word-groups in grammars and dictionaries.

By the end of the first year we should have attained to a considerable degree our first objects—training of the organs,

¹ H. SWEET, *The Practical Study of Languages*. N. Y.: Henry Holt, 1900.

and correct fundamental speech-habits—with a well-digested vocabulary of the most common terms, thoroughness being considered of greater importance than extent.

As compared with the work outlined for the first year in the report of the Committee of Twelve, the amount read in class will probably be rather less than more than the minimum suggestion of 100 pages, but this should be supplemented by encouraging outside reading of easy stories. Most of the better pupils may be led to take an interest in this, and the habit of reading French for one's own pleasure is the best guarantee that the power once acquired will not be lost.

With the beginning of the second year our special aims—power to use the foreign language, and a sympathetic knowledge of the life, customs, and literature of the foreign people—assume greater prominence.

What Sweets says of grammatical analysis—that it has two stages, one of recognition, or identification, and another of reproduction or construction—is true of other features of language work. Most of the matter attacked during the first year is so essential that it must be carried to the second stage, and one cannot be said to know the language at all until these elements are mastered. The great mass of vocabulary, idioms, and less usual constructions is, however, by no means essential to a good knowledge of French, and to a satisfactory feeling that one is able to cope with most that he is likely to find. With a little help from the dictionary and a little wit, one easily discovers the meaning of new expressions as they arise, and can get along very well, just as the child does in his own language, until frequent repetition fixes gradually in the memory what is most useful. In behalf of greater variety and interest, progress may therefore become more rapid. Only the more important expressions and constructions need be dwelt upon.

The elements of grammar should be studied in a systematic way during the second year, and a text-book for this purpose is advisable. Writing in French, which has hitherto consisted of the writing of paradigms, dictation exercises, and very close imitations of portions of the French text studied, assumes the

form of a somewhat freer paraphrasing. The reading matter remains the center of the instruction; and before translation is attempted, the thought of the original should be brought out by question and answer, by paraphrasing and explanations in French, thus furnishing abundant oral drill. Giving abstracts in French is good for those pupils who can do it well without too great expenditure of time, but is apt to drag, to give too much time to a single pupil, and thus degenerate into an individual rather than a class exercise.

Translation must be an idiomatic rendering of thought, and not a mechanical substitution of English words for French ones. It is exceedingly difficult to secure this. Where sentences are short, it may be done by letting the teacher give the French sentence, the pupil, with book closed, translating into English. With more complicated sentences, the pupil may be asked to read the French aloud himself, and then, with book closed, to give in English the substance of what he has read; finally, with book open, attempting the finished translation. Pupils should be taught to simplify such sentences in a first reading by rejecting or skimming over all nonessentials—adjective, adverbial, and parenthetical expressions—until the bare skeleton of subject, verb, and simplest complements stand out clearly. Careful attention to punctuation and connectives will usually make this easy. Then the bones may be clothed with flesh until the original sentence appears with all its parts in proper proportion. English should never be accepted until it is correct, appropriate, and expressive.

Here, as in the first year, I should advise reading in class rather less than is recommended by the Committee of Twelve, in order to give plenty of oral work, dictation, paraphrasing, careful grammatical explanation of essentials, etc. The more interested pupils may be led to read largely out of class, sometimes as much as a book a week. This reading is rapid, with little use of dictionary, but in an enjoyable way enlarges vocabulary, develops linguistic feeling and judgment, and gives the power to seize quickly the main thought of a passage.

Probably easy narration is the most effective reading matter.

American pupils do not manifest much enthusiasm for large doses of *Realien* or description; and the selections of Beyer and Passy would strike most young Americans as rather tame. Our texts are apt to be too difficult both in form and thought. The Committee of Twelve says: "Teachers should not be in too great haste to get to reading good literature." The Germans defer such reading until the third or fourth year of study, and leave until the sixth to ninth years books that American schools take not infrequently in the second, and in rare cases in the first year of French. For the best work with second-year pupils I should be glad to read nothing harder than Malot's *Sans Famille*, while for third-year work Verne, Dumas, Mérimée, etc., are about right in point of difficulty. Add an easy comedy and a little history, say Thiers' *Expédition de Bonaparte en Égypte*, or Ségur's *Retraite de Moscou*, and the third year will be complete. By this time English may be heard only in an occasional explanation and translation, and during the second and third years much time may be saved by having a large part of the translating done by the teacher. Thirty-nine of your forty boys ought to be profiting more by it than they would if the fortieth were doing the translating.

Add a fourth year for history of a harder sort and for real literature, and we shall have a well-rounded course, if five periods per week be given the first year, and not less than four thereafter.

And now the cry goes up: "Not a high school in the country gives seventeen week-hours to French!" "I must fit in one year for 'Tech,' and in two for the Harvard advanced examination!" Precisely; and the conclusion is simply this: the secondary schools cannot give a strong, well-rounded course in French, and all the other things they are attempting, to any one pupil. But we have been planning the kind of course that shall educate a boy; that with neither dawdling nor hurry shall train eye and ear and tongue; that shall make certain principles of language and logic a part of himself; that shall show him the real meaning and use of grammar; that shall improve his English; and that shall finally send him out with a knowledge of French that will stay by him, making it a pleasure to read a French book,

and a possibility to carry on a simple conversation in French or to get the substance of a clearly delivered French speech. Less than that should not be done if French is to be studied at all. If a boy is to stop short of this, he had better let French alone and put his time into studying his own language.

But why say that we cannot have time enough to learn one foreign language with some thoroughness, when high-school pupils are studying four? Without discussing the question whether a competent teacher of French could not take the time now assigned to English grammar in the two grades below the high school, and in it teach a year's work of French and more English than the pupils get now, let us ask simply whether the boy who knows something of one language is not better educated than his neighbor who knows nothing of four; nothing, that is, which makes any of the four of use to him even for reading, or leaves any of the four as a permanent acquisition. My pupils who enter Harvard give thirty-four week-hours to the preparation of Latin, German, and French. I believe that if this time were devoted entirely to either Latin and German or French and German, the school, its graduates, and the college would all be better off.

This brings us to the second topic suggested by my Harvard friend, namely, bringing the requirements of the colleges into harmony with the primary function of the schools.

Most candidates take entrance examinations in four languages, yet the cry of unsatisfactory language work is universal. Has it occurred to anyone that the remedy may lie in better work in fewer dialects? In the interest of a better and more symmetrical education in the high schools, let the colleges refuse to accept more than two foreign languages in entrance examinations, and let proficiency in these be properly tested and rewarded. To the Harvard two-point credit for elementary French add an oral requirement with a two-point credit, so that the four points now given for advanced French, which means in most cases an entirely one-sided development along the lines of translation and composition, might be given instead for a symmetrical knowledge of the language, including a good understanding of elementary gram-

mar, the ability to translate simple French into good English, to read French aloud intelligibly, to write French from dictation, to write in French an abstract of a short, easy story read aloud at the examination. Two points additional for more difficult translation and composition, and the same treatment of German, would make it possible to get twelve points for good work in any two of the four languages usually offered. Including English, this gives to languages sixteen out of twenty-six points. With the present importance of mathematics, science, and history, to say nothing of music and art, would not a larger proportion be monstrous?

Giving to two foreign languages the time now divided among three gives to each the seventeen week-hours already asked for a satisfactory course. Unless, however, the colleges will move in the matter, the schools can do but little; for it is a fact that if 10 per cent. of the pupils in a class are heading for college, the instruction will follow the lines of work demanded for the college examination, and the 90 per cent. must get what they can out of it.

Meanwhile, most teachers of French have little option what to do or how to do it. A fence of translation, grammar, and composition stands before them; they are allowed the least possible time in which to train pupils to leap over it; and their success is measured by the proportion of their pupils who land on the other side. This process is commonly called education.

Modern-language teachers in this country need to awake, to discuss, to organize, to make known the difference between good work and poor, to demand what we must have in order to do the former. We must show plainly that French, properly studied, is neither easy or superficial, nor lacking, as an educational subject, in either discipline or culture. And we must likewise emphasize that to teach it in this way takes time and that the French-in-twenty-lessons charlatans have no place among educators.

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